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RIGHTS OF PERSONS BELONGING TO NATIONAL, ETHNIC, RELIGIOUS AND LINGUISTIC MINORITIES

Written statement submitted by Baha'i International Community, a non-governmental organization in consultative status (category II)

The Secretary-General has received the following communication which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV)

[2 January 1991]

1. The Baha'i International Community welcomes the advances made by the Commission on Human Rights in drafting a declaration on the rights of persons belonging to national, ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities. The Commission's efforts could not be more timely. As Mr. Asbjörn Eide pointed out in his excellent report in 1990 to the Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, the recent political changes in many parts of the world have exposed long-simmering ethnic tensions, which threaten to lead to renewed discrimination and outbreaks of violence. We are pleased that Mr. Eide is undertaking a study for the Sub-Commission on possible ways and means of facilitating the peaceful and constructive solutions of problems involving minorities.

2. There is no question that one's unique cultural characteristics should be prized, and that pride in one's culture can be a healthy emotion that can motivate persons to achieve their full potential and reach out to others, both within and without their particular group. At the same time, if taken to an extreme, as it too often is, attachment to one's group can lead to mistrust of and enmity towards other groups. Unbridled pride in one's heritage then becomes an excuse for the venting of hate upon others, because they do not share the same culture, language or religion. Such attitudes contribute to the deplorable violations of minority rights that have occurred throughout this century.

3. In the Baha'i view the protection of all human rights depends on a recognition of the fundamental unity of the human race. Most certainly minorities of every kind should be encouraged to cherish their unique individual and group identities. Only an appreciation of the bonds uniting all peoples can sustain productive dialogue between minorities and majorities and promote the conditions in which the enjoyment of human rights can flourish.

4. Such a change in attitudes can be brought about through formal and informal education. Because of the importance of education, we have therefore, recommended that the draft declaration under consideration by the Working Group explicitly mention the right of minorities to adequate education and training without discrimination. Only if there is no discrimination in access to high quality education, can minorities assume their rightful place in society. Members of minorities should be given the opportunity to sutdy their own language and culture, and to acquire the practical and social skills necessary for them to succeed both in their local communities and within the majority society. We hope that the efforts to provide basic education for all by the year 2000 will provide added impetus to the establishment and improvement of schools in regions inhabited by minorities.

5. Furthermore, we have proposed to the Working Group that the draft declaration safeguard the freedom to exchange information about minorities and their unique languages, culture, and religions with a view to fostering better understanding among all people. We do so, because we are convinced that society's ignorance of minorities and their way of life is one of the principal causes of intimidation and discrimination that minorities suffer. Education that seeks to instil in every individual a greater knowledge of, and appreciation for, the rich contributions that minority cultures have made to society is a critical requirement for the full realization of the human rights of minorities.

6. In conclusion, the Baha'i International Community strongly supports the work undertaken to date by the Working Group and we hope that the recommendations we have submitted were of assistance in formulating a suitable declaration that will make an effective contribution to improving the human rights situation of minorities.